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THE CHARACTER OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE

BY

RAMSAY MUIR

PROFESSOR OF MODERN HISTORY IN THE
UNIVERSITY OF MANCHESTER

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NOTE.—*The following essay is based mainly upon a book by the same author entitled "The Expansion of Europe," in which an attempt is made to estimate the part played by various nations in extending the civilisation of Europe over the whole world. A few references are therefore given to the fuller treatment of various aspects of the subject contained in the book.*

I

NEARLY all the great self-governing nations of the world are now combined in a desperate struggle against the scarcely-veiled military despotism of the Central European Powers, and the object of the struggle has been well defined by President Wilson as the securing of freedom for democracy, so that it shall be safe from the threats of militarist and conquering empires.

In the forefront of the group of States engaged in the defence of democracy stands the British Empire, the greatest dominion that has ever existed in history, which covers a quarter of the earth's surface, and in which a quarter of the earth's population is subject (at any rate, in form) to the rule of two small European islands.

The very existence of this huge Empire seems to many people to stultify in some degree the cause for which the world's democracies are fighting. It seems, at first sight, to be simply the greatest example of that spirit of conquest

and of military dominion against which we are striving. This is the view taken by some neutrals. "Imperialism is the enemy," says one Swiss writer; "whatever form it takes, German or Russian, British or French, it is equally the foe of free government." The Germans themselves make great play with this notion. They describe the British Empire as a vast, greedy tyranny, built up by fraud. They invite us to free the oppressed millions of India before we talk hypocritically about liberty. They assert that the naval supremacy of Britain is far more dangerous to the freedom of the world than the military power of Germany could ever be. Some people even in the allied countries are affected by doubts of this kind. The Russian Socialists, for whom imperialism has in the past meant nothing but a hideous repression of freedom, are ready to assume that the British Empire, because it is called an empire, must mean the same ugly things. And criticism of the same kind can sometimes be heard in France, in Italy, in the United States, and in Britain herself.

Our purpose, in this short paper, is to examine the truth of these superficial impressions. But before we do so there are two preliminary observations worth making.

The first is that men's minds are extraordinarily easily influenced by mere *words*. The word "Empire" suggests, to many, conquest and dominion over unwilling subjects. In so far as it does so, it begs the question. As we shall try to show, this word is really misapplied to the British realms. The character of their government and of the bond which holds them together would be much better expressed by a phrase which is now being widely used in Britain—the British *Commonwealth of Nations*. Of course, that title also begs the question in a way. But the reader is asked, at the outset, to keep in his mind, while he reads, the question, "Is the title 'Empire,' or the title 'Commonwealth of Na-

tions,' the truer description of this extraordinary aggregate of lands and peoples?''

The second preliminary observation which we shall make is, that there are certain outstanding features of the war which must have thrown a striking light upon the character of the British Empire.

Over a million volunteer soldiers have come from the great self-governing Colonies of the British Empire without any compulsion being imposed upon them. The princes and peoples of India have vied with one another in their generous and spontaneous gifts to the cause, while Indian forces have fought gallantly in all parts of the world, and at the same time India has been almost denuded of British troops. That is not the sort of thing which happens when the masters of a tyrannical dominion find themselves fighting for their very life. Apart from the unhappy troubles in Ireland (which were the work of a small minority) and the rebellion in South Africa (which was promptly put down by the South African Dutch themselves), there has been no serious disturbance in all the vast realms of this Empire during the three years' strain of war. Even the most recently subdued of African tribes have shown no desire to seize this opportunity for throwing off ''the foreign yoke.'' On the contrary, they have sent touching gifts, and offers of aid, and expressions of good-will. It appears, then, that the subjects of this ''Empire'' have, for the most part, no quarrel with its government, but are well content that it should survive.

II

The creation of the British Empire has been simply a part (though, perhaps, the greatest part) of that outpouring of the European peoples which has, during the last four

centuries, brought the whole world under the influence of western civilisation. That is a great achievement, and it has brought in sight the establishment of a real world-order. It is merely foolish to condemn the "lust of conquest" which has driven the European peoples to subdue the rest of the world, though, of course, we ought to condemn the cruelties and injustices by which it has sometimes been accompanied. But without it North and South America, Australia, and South Africa would have remained deserts, inhabited by scattered bands of savages. Without it India would have been sentenced to the eternal continuance of the sterile and fruitless wars between despotic conquerors which made up her history until the British power was established. Without it the backward peoples of the earth would have stagnated for ever in the barbarism in which they have remained since the beginning. The "imperialism" of the European nations has brought great results to the world. It has made possible that unification of the political and economic interests of the whole globe which we see beginning to-day. It is one of the fine aspects of this grim and horrible war that it affects the interests of the whole world, and that the whole world knows this.

The giant's part which has been played by Britain in the conquest of the world by Western civilisation, and the peculiar character of her work, have been due to two things—British institutions and the British Navy.

It ought never to be forgotten that down to the nineteenth century (that is, during all the earlier part of the process of European expansion) Britain was the only one of the greater European States which possessed self-governing institutions. She has been, in truth (this is not a boast, but a mere statement of indisputable historical fact), the inventor of political liberty on the scale of the great nation-state, as Greece was the inventor of political liberty

on the scale of the little city-state. And wherever free institutions exist to-day, they have been derived from Britain, either by inheritance, as in America and the self-governing British colonies, or by imitation, as in all other cases.

When the outpouring of Europe into the rest of the world began, the British peoples alone had the habit and instinct of self-government in their very blood and bones. And the result was that, wherever they went, they carried self-government with them. *Every* colony of British settlers, from the very first, was endowed with self-governing institutions. *No* colony ever planted by any other nation ever obtained corresponding rights.* That is one of the outstanding features of British expansion. In the eighteenth century, and even in the middle of the nineteenth century, Britain herself and the young nations that had sprung from her loins were *almost the only free States existing in the world.* It was because they were free that they throve so greatly. They expanded on their own account, they threw out fresh settlements into the empty lands wherein they were planted, often against the wish of the Mother Country. And this spontaneous growth of vigorous free communities has been one of the principal causes of the immense extension of the British Empire.

Now one of the results of the universal existence of self-governing rights in British colonies was that the colonists were far more prompt to resent and resist any improper exercise of authority by the Mother Country than were the settlers in the colonies of other countries, which had no self-governing rights at all. It was this independent spirit, nurtured by self-government, which led to the revolt of the American colonies in 1775, and to the foundation of the United States as an independent nation. In that great controversy an immensely important question was raised, which

*See "The Expansion of Europe," Chapters II. and III.

was new to human history. It was the question whether unity could be combined with the highest degree of freedom; whether it was possible to create a sort of fellowship or brotherhood of free communities, in which each should be master of its own destinies, and yet all combine for common interests. But the question (being so new) was not understood on either side of the Atlantic. Naturally, Britain thought most of the need of maintaining unity; she thought it unfair that the whole burden of the common defence should fall upon her, and she committed many foolish blunders in trying to enforce her view. Equally naturally the colonists thought primarily of their own self-governing rights, which they very justly demanded should be increased rather than restricted. The result was the unhappy war, which broke up the only family of free peoples that had yet existed in the world, and caused a most unfortunate alienation between them, whereby the cause of liberty in the world was greatly weakened.*

Britain learned many valuable lessons from the American Revolution. In the new empire which she began to build up as soon as the old one was lost, it might have been expected that she would have fought shy of those principles of self-government which no other State had ever tried to apply in its over-sea dominions, and which seemed to have led (from the imperialistic point of view) to such disastrous results in America. But she did not do so; the habits of self-government were too deeply rooted in her sons to make it possible for her to deny them self-governing rights in their new homes. On the contrary, she learnt, during the nineteenth century, to welcome and facilitate every expansion of their freedom,† and she gradually felt her way

* See "The Expansion of Europe," Chapter IV., where this view of the American Revolution is developed.

† See "The Expansion of Europe," Chapter VI., where the "Trans-

towards a means of realising a partnership of free peoples whereby freedom should be combined with unity. Its success (although it must still undergo much development) has been strikingly shown in the Great War.

Thus British institutions—the institutions of national self-government, which are peculiarly British in origin—have played a main part both in determining the character of the British Empire and in bringing about its wonderful expansion. The more the British Empire has grown the more freedom has been established on the face of the earth.

The second great factor in the growth of the British Empire has been the power of the British Navy, which has been the greatest sea power of the world practically since the overthrow of the Spanish Armada in 1588.

It is a striking fact that in all her history Britain has never possessed a large army, until the necessities of this war suddenly forced her (as they are now forcing America) to perform the miracle of calling her whole manhood from the pursuits of peace to arms, of training them, and of equipping them, all within two years. In 1775 it was the fact that she possessed only a tiny armed force (some 40,000 men for the defence of all her dominions), which made it necessary for her, for example, to hire Hessian troops in a hurry for the purposes of the American War of Independence. Is not this an astounding paradox, that the power which has acquired dominion over one-quarter of the earth has done it without ever possessing a large army? And does it not suggest that the process by which this empire was acquired must have been very different from the ordinary processes of military conquest? This is a paradox which those who speak of the British Empire as if it were a mere military dominion must somehow explain.

formation of the British Empire'' during the nineteenth century is analysed.

But there has been the supreme British fleet. It has made the creation and preservation of the Empire possible by securing the free transit not merely of soldiers, but, far more important, of settlers, merchants, administrators, organisers, and missionaries. Scattered as it is over all the seas of the world, the British Empire would undoubtedly be broken into fragments if the security of the ocean highroads by which it is united were ever to be lost. But although the British Navy has made the growth of the Empire possible, and has held it together, it has not conquered it. A fleet *cannot* conquer great areas of land; it *cannot* hold masses of discontented subjects in an unwilling obedience; it *cannot* threaten the freedom or independence of any land-power. It is strong only for defence, not for offence.

There are two aspects of the work of the British Navy during the last three centuries which deserve to be noted, because they also help to indicate the character of the work done by the British Empire during this period.

In the first place, the British naval power has never been used to threaten the freedom of any independent State. On the contrary, it has been employed time and again as the last bulwark of freedom against great military Powers which have threatened to overwhelm the freedom of their neighbours by mere brute strength. That was so in the sixteenth century, when Spain seemed to be within an ace of making herself the mistress of the world. It was so a hundred years later, when the highly-organised power of Louis XIV. threatened the liberties of Europe. It was so again, a century later, when Napoleon's might overshadowed the world. It is so once more to-day, when the German peril menaces the liberty of nations. During each of these desperate crises the British Navy has seemed to neutrals to be interfering unduly with their trade, in so far as their

trade helped the enemy. In this connection it is worth noting that it has been for two centuries the invariable rule of the British Navy that in no circumstances must a neutral vessel ever be sunk, and in no circumstances must the lives of non-combatants be sacrificed. But is it not reasonable to say that in each of these great wars the theoretic rights of neutral trade were justly subordinated to the struggle for the preservation of liberty? In all the great crises of modern European history, then, British naval power has been the ultimate bulwark of liberty.

But how has this power been used in times of peace? The Spanish naval power, which preceded the British, enforced for its people a monopoly of the use of all the oceans of the world except the North Atlantic. The Dutch naval power, which carried on an equal rivalry with the British during the seventeenth century, established a practical monopoly for Dutch trade in all the waters east of the Straits of Malacca. But the British naval power has never for a moment been used to restrict the free movement of the ships of all nations in times of peace in any of the seas of the world. This, again, is not a boast, but a plain statement of undeniable historical fact. The freedom of the seas in times of peace (which is much more important than the freedom of the seas in times of war) has only existed during the period of British naval supremacy, but it has existed so fully that we have got into the habit of taking it for granted, and of assuming, rather rashly, that it can never be impaired. What is more, it has been entirely during the period of British naval supremacy, and mainly by the work of the British fleet, that the remoter seas have been charted and that piracy has been brought to an end, and the perils of the sailor reduced to the natural perils of wind and wave. This also is a contribution to the freedom of the seas.

British institutions, the institutions of self-government, and the British Navy, which has at all times been a bulwark of liberty, and has never interfered in times of peace with the use of the seas by any nation—these have been the main explanations of the fabulous growth of the British Empire. We cannot here attempt to trace the story of this growth, but must be content to survey the completed structure and consider on what principles it is governed.

III

The vast realms of the British Empire fall naturally into three groups: the great self-governing dominions, Canada, Australia, South Africa, New Zealand, and Newfoundland; the lands of ancient civilisation, India and Egypt; and the wide protectorates (mainly in Africa, but also in Asia and the Pacific) which are inhabited by backward and primitive peoples. There are other regions also, such as the West Indian Islands, or the military posts and calling stations like Gibraltar, Malta, and Aden, which do not fall into any of these three categories. But they are of relatively minor importance, and it will be convenient to concentrate our attention upon each of the three main groups in turn.

Regarding the self-governing dominions, the intelligent reader scarcely needs to be told that they are to all intents and purposes entirely free States, which remain in association with the Mother Country only by their own free will. If they were to claim complete independence, there would certainly be no attempt made by Britain to force them to remain in partnership, though the breach would be a great sorrow to the Mother Country. They make their own laws; they appoint all their own officials (except the Governors, who perform almost purely formal functions, corresponding to those performed by the King in the "crowned republic"

of Britain) ; they levy their own taxes, and both may and do impose any duties they think fit upon imports from Britain equally with those coming from other States. They pay not a farthing of tribute to the Mother Country. They are not even required to contribute to the cost of the Navy, which protects them all, though some of them make voluntary contributions. The only restriction upon their political independence is that they do not pursue an independent foreign policy or maintain ambassadors or consuls of their own in foreign countries. The responsibility (and the total cost) of this function falls upon Britain. If Britain should be drawn into war, the great dominions are also technically at war, and if Britain were to pursue a warlike or aggressive policy, this would soon alienate some or all of these young democracies. But it is only by their own free will that they take any part in a war in which Britain is involved, and the Mother Country has neither the right nor the power to demand military aid from them. Yet we have seen what whole-hearted and generous aid they have all given. Would it have been as great, or as valuable, if it had been compulsory? Gradually they are beginning, through their Prime Ministers or other representatives, to take a more and more effective part in the direction of the common policy of the Empire. The meetings of what was called the "Imperial War Cabinet" in the spring of 1917 marked a definite stage in this development, and incidentally afforded a very striking proof of the elasticity and adaptability of the British system of government. It is certain that this method of co-operation will be carried still further in the future.

Clearly, so far as concerns the great dominions, the British Empire is far from being a military domination imposed by force. It is a voluntary partnership or brotherhood of free peoples, a Commonwealth of Nations. It is a won-

derful achievement in the combination of unity and freedom, an experiment in the unforced co-operation of free States such as has never before been seen in human history. If *that* is the meaning of Imperialism, who will cavil at it?

Only one series of events has prevented a large part of the world from realising that this was the spirit in which the British Empire was governed. The South African War made Britain appear, in the eyes of most of the world, a vast, greedy, tyrannical power, which, not content with an already immense dominion, must fall upon and devour two tiny, free republics, merely because they contained gold! But the world did not appreciate the real meaning of the South African War.* In the British South African colonies (the Cape and Natal) the fullest equality of political rights was enjoyed by Dutch and British residents alike, and their institutions were the same as those of other British dominions. But in the semi-independent Dutch republics of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State (especially the former) no such equality of rights existed. The ideal they aimed at was that of Dutch predominance, and some of their leaders hoped in time to drive the British out of Africa, and to establish there an exclusively Dutch supremacy. This did not matter so long as the inhabitants of these lands were only a few Dutch farmers. But when the discovery of gold and diamonds brought an immense inrush of British and other settlers, who henceforth produced nearly all the wealth of the country, this denial of equality of rights became serious, and the programme of Dutch conquest, prepared for mainly at the cost of the new settlers, began to seem dangerous. This was the real cause of the South African War. It might, perhaps, have been avoided, and, if so, those who precipitated it unnecessarily were

* See "The Expansion of Europe," Chapters VI. and VIII., for an analysis of British policy in South Africa.

much to blame, whether they were Boers or Britons. There were faults on both sides. But essentially the war was, on Britain's side, a war for equality of rights. What were its results? So far as Britain was concerned, the bones of thousands of her sons lay on the African veldt, and her public debt was vastly increased. She made no direct material gains of any sort: the gold-mines remained in exactly the same hands as before. But so far as South Africa was concerned, the result was that in a very few years the conquered republics were given full self-governing powers, on the basis of equal rights for both races, and a few years later they and the older British colonies combined in the Union of South Africa, a great, free, federal state, in whose affairs Dutch and British have equal rights, and in which a new nation, formed by the blending of the two races, can grow up. *That* was what British imperialism led to in South Africa.

And now observe the sequel. When the great war began (scarcely more than a dozen years from the time when Dutch and Britons were fighting bitterly) the Germans tried to bring about a revolt among the more ignorant Dutch. It was put down by the forces of the Union, mainly Dutch, led by Louis Botha, who had once been the commander-in-chief of the Transvaal army, and was now the prime minister of a self-governing dominion within the British Empire. And then, still led by Botha, a combined force of Dutch and Britons proceeded to the conquest of German South-West Africa, suffering casualties which, by a happy chance, were exactly equally divided between the two races. And then a South African contingent was sent to East Africa, and the supreme command over them, and over British regulars and Indian regiments and native levies, was assumed by the Dutch General Smuts, once a formidable leader against the British. And,

lastly, General Smuts came to England to join in the deliberations of the Imperial War Cabinet, and to make speeches of profound foresight and political wisdom to the British people, in which he sang the praises of the British Commonwealth of free nations as something that deserved every sacrifice from the peoples enrolled under its sheltering ægis.

Is there any parallel to these events in the history of the world? And is the Empire whose spirit leads to such results to be spoken of as if it were a mere, ruthless military dominion?

IV

The second great group of British dominions consists of those ancient and populous lands, notably India and Egypt, which, though they have been able to develop remarkable civilisations, have never in all their history succeeded in establishing the rule of a just and equal law, or known any form of government save arbitrary despotism.

It is impossible to trace here, even in the baldest outline, the steps by which Britain acquired the sovereignty over India and Egypt.* They form two of the most curious and romantic episodes in history, for the strange thing is that in both cases British intervention was begun with no thought of conquest, and in both cases the responsibility of political control was assumed by Britain with very great reluctance. This may sound incredible, but it is an indisputable historical fact. We must content ourselves with a very brief analysis of the character and results of the British dominion.

What, then, has the establishment of British power meant in India? Until the British power was established, India had in all her long history never known political unity. She had seen nothing but an almost uninterrupted succes-

*India is dealt with in Chapters III., IV., VI., and Egypt in Chapter VIII. of "The Expansion of Europe."

sion of wars, an endless series of conquests and evanescent dominions. Always Might had been Right; Law had represented only the will of the master, and the law courts only the instruments of his arbitrary authority, so that the lover of righteousness could only pursue it by cutting himself off from all the ties of society and living the life of the ascetic. India was the most deeply divided land in the world—divided not only by differences of race and tongue (there are 38 distinct languages in India to-day, and some of them differ more widely than Russian and Spanish), but divided still more deeply by bitter conflicts of creed and, most sharply of all, by the unchanging, impermeable barriers of caste, which had arisen in the first instance from the determination of conquering peoples to keep themselves free from any intermixture with their subjects. Nowhere in the world are there to be seen, cheek by jowl, such profound contrasts between distinct grades of civilisation as are represented by the difference between (say) the almost savage Bhils or the out-caste sweepers, and the high-bred Brahmin, Rajput or Mahomedan chiefs. One result of these time-worn distinctions is that through all the ages the ruling castes and races have been accustomed to expect, and the mass of humble men to offer, the most abject submission; so that British administrators have often had to complain that the chief difficulty was, not to make laws for the protection of the humble, but rather to persuade those for whose benefit they were made to take advantage of them.

To this divided land the British rule has brought three inestimable boons: a firmly organised political unity; the impartial administration of a just and equal system of law, based on a codification of Indian usages; and the maintenance of a long, unbroken peace. To this may be added the introduction not only of the material boons of western

civilisation—railways, roads, irrigation, postal facilities, and so forth—but of western learning. This has had to be conveyed through the vehicle of English, because it was impossible to create, in all the 38 vernaculars, a whole literature of modern knowledge. And the consequence is, that all the members of the large and growing class of University-trained students, whose existence for the first time creates an instructed public opinion in India, are able freely to communicate with one another, and to share a common body of ideas, to an extent that has never before been possible in all the earlier history of India. Out of all these causes, due to the British rule, there has begun to arise in this deeply divided land a sentiment of national unity, and an aspiration after self-government. This sentiment and this aspiration are in themselves excellent things; their danger is that they may lead to a demand for a too rapid advance. For national unity *cannot* be created by merely asserting that it exists. It will not be fully established until the deeply-rooted differences which are only beginning to be obliterated have largely ceased to determine men's thoughts and actions, as they still do in India. And self-government, on the amplest scale of modern democracy, cannot be achieved until the traditionally ascendant classes, and the traditionally subject classes, have alike learned to recognise the equality of their rights before the law. But the foundations have been made of advance towards both of these aims; they are the result of British rule.

There are discontents in India; there is much sharp criticism of the methods of the supreme Government, especially —almost exclusively—among the new class of western-educated men. But the criticism has not gone so far, except with a very few fanatics, as to assert that British rule is itself unjust or evil; on the contrary, all the best opinion in India desires to see that great land steadily progressing

towards greater national unity and greater political liberty under the guidance and protection of British rule; all the best opinion in India recognises that the progress already made has been due to British rule, and that its continuance depends upon the continuance of British rule; all the best opinion in India desires that India, even when she becomes, as she will steadily become, more fully self-governing, should remain a partner in the British Commonwealth of Nations. It was a real satisfaction of one of the aspirations of India when three representatives of the Indian Government, an Indian prince, an Indian lawyer, and an Anglo-Indian administrator, came to London in the spring of 1917 to take part in the councils of the Empire during the crisis of its destiny. Criticism and discontent exist. But their existence is a sign of life; and the freedom with which they are expressed is a proof that the Government of India does not follow a merely repressive policy, and that the peoples of India have at last been helped to escape, in a large degree, from that complete docility and submissiveness which are the unhappy signs that a people is enslaved body and soul.

India does not pay one penny of tribute to Britain. She pays the cost of the small, efficient army which guards her frontiers, but if any part of it is borrowed for service elsewhere, the cost falls upon the British Treasury. This rule was, indeed, broken in regard to the first Indian contingents in the present war, but only at the request of the Indian members of the Viceroy's Legislative Council. India contributes not a penny towards the upkeep of the British fleet, which guards her shores; nor does she defray any part of the cost of the consuls and ambassadors in all parts of the world who protect the interests of her travelling citizens. She is a self-dependent state, all of whose resources are expended on the development of her own prosperity, and ex-

pended with the most scrupulous honesty and economy. Her ports are open, of course, to British traders, but they are open on precisely the same terms to the traders of all other countries; there is no special privilege for the British merchant. Recently she has entered upon a policy of fiscal protection, with a view to the development of cotton manufactures. This policy was directed primarily against Lancashire. But because Indian opinion demanded it, it has not been resisted, in spite of the fact that the bulk of British opinion holds such a policy to be economically unsound. Nor have British citizens any special privileges in other respects. It was laid down as long ago as 1833, as an "indisputable principle," that "the interests of the native subjects are to be consulted in preference to those of Europeans, wherever the two come in competition." Where will you find a parallel to that statement of policy by the supreme government of a ruling race?

India, in short, is governed, under the terms of a code of law based upon Indian custom, by a small number of picked British officials, only about 3,000 in all, among whom highly-trained Indians are increasingly taking their place, and who work in detail through an army of minor officials, nearly all Indians, and selected without respect to race, caste, or creed. She is a self-contained country, whose resources are devoted to her own needs. She is prospering to a degree unexampled in history. She has achieved a political unity never before known to her. She has been given the supreme gift of a just and impartial law, administered without fear or favour. She has enjoyed a long period of peace, unbroken by any attack from external foes. Here, as fully as in the self-governing Colonies, membership of the British Empire does not mean subjection to the selfish dominion of a master, or the subordination to that master's interests of the vital interests of the com-

munity. It means the establishment among a vast population of the essential gifts of western civilisation—rational law, and the liberty which exists under its shelter.

What has been said of India might equally be said of Egypt, *mutatis mutandis*, but space does not permit of any detail on this theme. Enough to say that the achievements of the short period since 1882, when the British occupation began, in the rescuing of the country from bankruptcy, in the abolition of the hideous tyranny under which the mass of the peasantry had long groaned, in the development of the natural resources of the country, in the introduction of western methods of government and education, in the removal of the peril of returning barbarism which threatened from the Soudan, and in the establishment of a just and equal system of law, is something which it would be hard to match in the records of history.*

Both in India and in Egypt lands of ancient civilisation have been rescued from a state of chaos and set upon the path which leads to unity and freedom. And in both countries, if the kind of political liberty which consists in the universal diffusion of a share in the control of government has not yet been established, it is because the peoples of these countries are not yet ready for that, and because the premature establishment of it, by enthroning afresh the old ruling castes, would endanger the far more real gifts of liberty which *have* been secured—liberty of thought and speech, liberty to enjoy the fruits of a man's own labour, freedom from subjection to merely arbitrary superiors, and the establishment of the elementary rights of the poor as securely as those of the powerful.

Empires, like men, are to be judged by their fruits.

* The causes of the British occupation of Egypt, and the development of Egypt under British control, are discussed in "The Expansion of Europe," Chapter VIII.

V

Lastly, we come to the vast regions inhabited wholly or mainly by backward or primitive peoples. Most of these are territories of comparatively recent acquisition. And it is here, and practically here alone, that the British Empire comes into comparison with the recently created empires of other European states, France, Germany, Italy and Belgium; none of which possess any self-governing colonies, or any extensive lands of ancient civilisation like India, unless the French colonies of Algeria and Annam are to be regarded as falling within the latter category.

The establishment of European control over most of the backward regions of the world has been, for the most part, a very recent and a very rapid development.*

The rush for extra-European territory which has taken place since 1878 is frequently regarded as a merely sordid exhibition of greed and of the lust for power; and indeed, some features of it deserve condemnation. But it ought to be recognised that this huge movement was, in the main, both necessary and beneficial. It was necessary because modern scientific industry needed the raw materials produced in these lands, and the primitive savagery of their occupants could not permanently stand in the way of the triumphant march of material progress. And it was (or was capable of being made) highly advantageous, not only to the industrial world, but to the backward peoples themselves, who, apart from it, might never have emerged from the unchanging barbarism in which they have mostly rested since the beginning of time. Whether that was to be so or not, depended, of course, upon the spirit in which the task was undertaken. We have seen some hideous examples of

* On these events see "The Expansion of Europe," Chapter VII.

depraved cruelty in the treatment of backward peoples, as in Leopold of Saxe-Coburg's administration of the Congo (which improved beyond recognition as soon as it was taken over by the Belgian Parliament), or as in the ruthless German slaughter of the Hereros in South-West Africa. But on the whole, and with exceptions, the establishment of European control has been as beneficial to its primitive subjects as it has been advantageous to the development of modern industry.

In spite of the vast extent of her Empire in other regions, Britain has taken a far larger share of this work than any other single power; perhaps, all things considered, she has taken as great a share as all the rest put together. What are the reasons for this?

The first reason is that Britain had begun long before any of the other powers. Both in Africa and in the islands of the Pacific, the work of exploration was mainly done by British travellers; British traders had almost alone been known to the native populations; and British missionaries, who were extraordinarily active during the nineteenth century, had planted themselves everywhere, and played an immensely important part in civilising their simple flocks. Wherever the missionary went, he undertook the defence of the primitive peoples to whom he preached, against the sometimes unscrupulous exploitation of the trader. It was the constant cry of the missionaries that the British Government ought to assume control, in order to keep the traders in order. They, and the powerful religious bodies at home which supported them, did much to establish the principle that it was the duty of government to protect the rights of native races, while at the same time putting an end to such barbarous usages as cannibalism, slavery, and human sacrifice, where they survived. Often, too, native chieftains begged to be taken under British protection;

while the better type of traders were anxious to see civilised administration set up, because it is only under civilised administration that trade can permanently thrive. Thus the British Government was under continual pressure from all sides, while the governments of other European countries as yet took no interest in colonial questions. The British Government was extremely loth to assume additional responsibilities, and did its best to avoid them. But some annexations it could not avoid.

Thus before the great European rush for colonies began, Britain, and Britain alone, had acquired a very wide experience in the government of backward peoples, and had worked out fairly clearly defined principles for the government of such peoples. What is more, in all the regions of this type which she controlled—indeed, throughout her whole Empire, everywhere save in the self-governing Colonies—it had become the practice of Britain to throw open all her ports and markets to the trade of all nations on exactly the same terms as to her own merchants. She is, in fact, the only great colonising Power which has adopted this principle. If a British merchant goes to the Philippines, or to Madagascar, or to Togoland, he finds that he has to compete with his American, French, or German rival on unequal terms, because a tariff discriminates between the citizen of the ruling people and the foreign trader. But if an American, French, or German merchant goes to India, or to any British Crown Colony or protectorate, he is admitted on exactly the same terms as the Briton. That distinction had already been established before 1878, though it has been accentuated since that date.

The British method of administering backward regions as worked out before 1878 was therefore based upon two principles, first the protection of native rights, and secondly the open door to all trading nations; and Britain may fairly

be said to have learnt to regard herself as being, in these regions, a trustee—a trustee on behalf of her subjects, and on behalf of the civilised world. Is it not true that if these principles had been universally adopted, half the bitterness which has been due to the rivalry of the European Powers for colonial possessions would have been obviated? To-day these principles are being advocated by many earnest men as representing the only mode by which the supremacy of western civilisation throughout the world can be reconciled with the avoidance of bitter rivalry and war between the civilised states; and they are preached as if they were a new doctrine of salvation. Yet they have been consistently practised by Britain during the greater part of the nineteenth century, and they are still practised by her to-day.

When the great rush began, the main object of the European states which took part in it was to obtain a monopoly-control of the regions which they annexed. But in all the available regions of the world, British trade had hitherto been preponderant. British traders saw before them the prospect of being absolutely excluded from lines of traffic which had hitherto been mainly in their hands, and they were naturally urgent that the only means of protection available should be taken, and that the areas in which they had been most active should be brought under British administration. If the new colonising Powers had been prepared to follow the policy of the open door, to which Britain had so long adhered, there would have been no reason to fear their annexations; rather there would have been every reason to rejoice that other nations were taking their share in the work of giving civilised government to these regions. But since their object was monopoly and exclusion, it was inevitable that Britain should undertake great new responsibilities. Her doing so was, indeed, the only practicable

way of preserving the trading rights, not merely of her own subjects, but also of all the other trading Powers which had not themselves joined in the rush, or had only a small part in it. Yet even now the British Government was extremely unwilling to take action, or to expand still further the already vast domains for whose good governance it was responsible. It had to be forced into action, mainly through the activity of trading companies.

In the vast new acquisitions of the period since 1878 (which were mainly in Africa), as in the earlier acquisitions, the old principles long pursued by Britain in the government of these backward regions were still maintained —protection of native rights and the open door. And thus it has come about that to-day these British realms present almost the only undeveloped fields to which all nations may resort on equal terms and in whose development all may take a share. The Germans have made a very large use of these opportunities.

Another point ought to be made. Immense as these regions are, and recently as they have been turned from barbarism, order and peace are maintained within them by extraordinarily small military forces: only the absolute necessary minimum. Yet they have been on the whole extraordinarily free from unrest or rebellion, such as has repeatedly disturbed the German colonies in Africa. There has been in their history no episode like the ruthless slaughter of the whole Herero race in German South-West Africa, after long, desperate, dragging campaigns. And while it would be absurd to claim that no abuses of the power of the white man over his coloured subjects have been known in them, at least there have been no outstanding or notorious atrocities. Their subjects are loyal, and are reconciled to peace, because they recognise that they are justly treated. That, it may fairly be claimed, is what the British Empire

has meant in the backward regions of the earth. And if it be true that the institution of civilised government in these regions was necessary in the interests at once of modern industry and of the backward peoples themselves, it is equally true that there are no other backward regions in which the interests of the native subjects have been more solicitously considered, and none in which the interests of all the industrial nations, and not merely of a single dominant race, have been so steadily held in view, as in these regions of the British Empire.

VI

If we now turn to consider as a whole the character of this vast Empire,* whose principal regions we have been examining, the first thing that must strike us is that, while it is by far the biggest of all the world-dominions which have come into existence in modern times, it is also the most loosely organised of them all. It is rather a partnership of a multitude of states in every grade of civilisation and every stage of development than an organised and consolidated dominion. Five of its chief members are completely self-governing, and share in the common burdens only by their own free will. All the remaining members are organised as distinct units, though subject to the general control of the home government. The resources of each unit are employed exclusively for the development of its own welfare. They pay no tribute; they are not required to provide any soldiers beyond the minimum necessary for their own defence and the maintenance of internal order.

This Empire, in short, is not in any degree organised for military purposes. It is strong for defence so long as it is

* The passages in this section are mainly quoted directly from "The Expansion of Europe."

sure of the command of the sea, since it is open to attack at singularly few points by land. But it is incapable, by its very nature and system of organisation, of threatening the existence of any of its rivals or of making a bid for world-supremacy. For, vast though its population and resources are, they *cannot* be made available for war except under the impulse of a great enthusiasm simultaneously dominating all its members, like that which has led them all to share in this war; and if its directors were to undertake an aggressive and conquering policy, not only could they not count upon general support, but they would probably bring about the disruption of the Empire.

The life-blood of this Empire is trade; its supreme interest is manifestly peace. The conception of the meaning of empire which is indicated by its history is not a conception of dominion for dominion's sake, imposed by brute force. On the contrary, it has come to be regarded as a trust, a trust to be administered in the interests of the subjects primarily, and secondarily in the interests of the whole civilized world. That this is not the assertion of a boast or of an unrealised ideal, but of a fact and a practice, is sufficiently demonstrated by two unquestionable facts, to which we have already referred, but which cannot be too often repeated. The first is the fact that the units of this empire are not only free from all tribute in money or men, but are not even required to make any contribution to the upkeep of the fleet, upon which the safety of all depends. The second is the fact that every port and every market in this vast empire, so far as they are under the control of the central government, are thrown open as freely to the citizens of all other States as to its own.

Finally, in this empire there has never been any attempt to impose a uniformity of method or even of laws upon the infinitely various societies which it embraces; it not only

permits, it cultivates and admires, varieties of type, and to the maximum practical degree it believes in self-government. It includes among its population representatives of almost every human race and religion, from the Australian Bushman to the subtle and philosophic Brahmin, from the African dwarf to the master of modern industry or the scholar of universities. Almost every form of social organisation known to man is represented in its complex and many-hued fabric. It embodies some of the most democratic communities which the world has known. It finds place for the highly organised caste system by which the teeming millions of India are held together. It preserves the simple tribal organisation of the African clans. To different elements among its subjects this empire appears in different aspects. To the self-governing dominions it is a brotherhood of free nations, co-operating for the defence and diffusion of the ideas and institutions of freedom. To the ancient civilisations of India or Egypt it is a power which, in spite of all its mistakes and limitations, has brought peace instead of turmoil, law instead of arbitrary might, unity instead of chaos, justice instead of oppression, freedom for the development of the capacities and characteristic ideas of their peoples, and the prospect of a steady growth of national unity and political responsibility. To the backward races it has meant the suppression of unending slaughter, the disappearance of slavery, the protection of the rights and usages of primitive and simple folk against reckless exploitation, and the chance of gradual improvement and emancipation from barbarism. But to all alike, to one-quarter of the inhabitants of the globe, it has meant the establishment of the Reign of Law and of the Liberty which can only exist under its shelter. In some degree, though imperfectly as yet, it has realised within its own body all the three great political ideals of the modern world.

It has fostered the rise of a sense of *nationality* in the young communities of the new lands, and in the old and once decaying civilisations of the most ancient historic countries. It has given a freedom of development to *self-government* in a variety of forms, to which there is no sort of parallel in any other empire that has ever existed. And by linking together so many diverse and contrasted peoples in a common peace it has already realised, for a quarter of the globe, the ideal of *internationalism* on a scale undreamt of by the most sanguine prophets of Europe.

Long ago, in the crisis of the American Revolution, when the faithfulness of Britain to her tradition of liberty was for an unhappy moment wavering in the balance, the great orator Burke spoke some glowing sentences on the character of the British Empire as he conceived it. They read like a prophetic vision of the Empire of to-day, linked by ties which, in his words, "though light as air, are strong as links of iron," yet joining in an heroic comradeship to defend the threatened shrine of freedom. "As long as you have the wisdom to keep the sovereign authority of this country as the sanctuary of liberty, the sacred temple consecrated to our common faith, wherever the sons of England worship freedom, they will turn their faces towards you. The more they multiply, the more friends you will have; the more ardently they love liberty, the more perfect will be their obedience. Slavery they can have anywhere. It is a weed that grows in every soil. They may have it from Spain, they may have it from Prussia. But freedom they can have only from you. This is the commodity of price, of which you have the monopoly. Deny them this participation of freedom, and you break that sole bond, which originally made, and must still preserve, the unity of the Empire. Do not dream that your letters of office, and your instructions, and your suspending clauses, are

the things that hold together the great contexture of the mysterious whole. These things do not make your government. Dead instruments, passive tools as they are, it is the spirit of the English Constitution that gives all their life and efficacy to them. It is the spirit of the English Constitution which, infused through the mighty mass, pervades, feeds, unites, invigorates, vivifies every part of the Empire, even down to the minutest member.''

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